

2/PRTS

10/511351
DT04 Rec'd PCT/PTO 12 OCT 2004

Gas supply device comprising a portable container and a
recharging base

5 The present invention relates to a gas supply device comprising a portable container that can be coupled to a recharging base for filling purposes, said base itself being able to be connected to a gas source and including an area for receiving the portable container.

10 A device of this type is described in document US-A-5,472,024 in the name of the Applicant.

15 The operational implementation of devices of this type, in particular in welding/cutting applications, has encountered problems connected with monitoring their use, especially in terms of compliance with the safety criteria relating to pressurized gas receptacles imposed by the local standards and/or by the industrial gas providers.

20 It is an object of the present invention to propose an improved device that makes it possible to guarantee usage in accordance with the safety criteria and offers increased capabilities, both for the user and for the industrial gas supplier, for a wide range of gases and commercial applications.

30 To this end, according to one feature of the invention, the container includes an electronic label and the base includes, in the vicinity of said area, a read device for reading such a label when the container is coupled to the base, the read device being connected to a control unit for controlling the supply of gas via the base.

35 The assignment of electronic labels to "traditional" gas cylinders that cannot be recharged in situ has been proposed for some time now [see, for example, documents

- 2 -

JP-A-06-094192 (Hitachi Seiki) and FR-A-2 685 519 (Gemplus Card)], but for identification and/or commercial distribution of the individual cylinders at the premises of retailers or end customers.

5

According to other features of the invention:

- the label and the read device are respectively arranged in the vicinity of the members for fluid connection between the container on the one hand and the base on the other hand;

- the base includes, in the low-pressure gas circuit, a solenoid valve operatively connected to the control unit.

15

Other features and advantages of the invention will emerge from the description, given with reference to the appended drawings, of embodiments which have been provided by way of illustration but with no limitation being implied. In the drawings:

- figure 1 is a schematic sectional view of a recharging base of a device according to the invention; and

- figure 2 is a schematic sectional view of a portable container of a device according to the invention.

Figure 1 shows the main elements of a recharging base according to the aforementioned document US-A-5,472,024, namely, in a casing 1 including, at its top, a housing 2 tailored to receive the mobile container, gas circuitry between a feed line 3 intended to be connected to a local gas source and a profiled outlet nozzle 4 intended for connection with the cavity for filling the container, as will be seen below.

The gas circuitry includes, from upstream to downstream, a high-pressure circuit 5, a flow-

- 3 -

regulating/pressure-reducing assembly 6, and a low-pressure circuit 7. According to one aspect of the invention, the high-pressure circuit 5 is provided with a pressure sensor 8 supplying signals which are read and stored in a control unit 9 which in turn supplies output signals to a display unit 10. The low-pressure circuit 7 is provided, downstream, with a solenoid valve 11 operatively connected to the control unit 9. The latter is supplied by a local electricity network, via a lead 12, or optionally by a rechargeable battery incorporated in the base.

Figure 2 shows the main elements of the portable container 50, essentially comprising, in a casing 13, a medium-pressure gas reservoir 14 for supplying a flow of gas controlled by a flow-regulating valve 16 to an outlet connection 15 that can be connected to a user apparatus. The reservoir 14 includes on its side an inlet connection with a valve 17 situated in the continuation of a profiled cavity 18 which is intended to receive the nozzle 4 when the container 50 is positioned in the housing 2 of the base 1.

According to a key aspect of the invention, the container 50 includes, in the vicinity of the inlet connection 17, typically around the inlet passage 18, an electronic label or "tag" 19 including at least one nonvolatile memory and an activation antenna that can be coupled by radiofrequency induction with a corresponding antenna of a radiofrequency read/write device 20 arranged in the base 20 around the nozzle 4 and connected to the control unit 9.

The device is employed in the following way:
During normal operation, the system (solenoid valve 11 (valve of the nozzle 4) for opening/closing the low-pressure circuit is normally closed. When a user places the portable container 50 on the base 1 in order to

- 4 -

fill it, the reader 20 reads the data contained in the label 19 concerning the container 50 in question, in particular the hydraulic test or retest date, the number of filling cycles already carried out, the type
5 of gas stored and the name of the registered user. These data are at least temporarily stored in the control unit 9 and can be transferred, via a data processing connector 21, to a portable computer or a local server, or can even be downloaded to a data
10 processing network or a telephone network via a data transfer line 22 connected to an output of the control unit 9.

When the data of the container 50 comply with the
15 safety criteria defined for the type of gas in question (which are imposed by the local standards and/or set by the industrial gas supplier) and if the pressure of the local gas source, measured by the sensor 8, is sufficient, the unit 9 initiates opening of the low-
20 pressure circuit and filling of the container 50, the data of the latter being updated in the label 19 and, correspondingly, in the unit 9.

On the other hand, when the data of the container do
25 not comply with the safety criteria for the gas in question or if the pressure of the source is not sufficient (for example less than 21 bar), the low-pressure circuit 7 remains closed and an error message is displayed on the display 10 indicating the procedure
30 for the client to follow: send the container for maintenance (in the event that the latter needs to be tested), correctly place the container on a base delivering the appropriate gas, or replace the reservoir containing the gas source.

35

The data of each transaction (date, hour, user name, initial pressure, final pressure, number of cycles run by the cylinder since the last test) can be

- 5 -

transferred, via the connector 21 or the line 22, in a standard format (for example, text file or Excel) and make it possible to produce a distribution of the gas consumption per user and also a curve showing the change of pressure in the gas source connected to the base over time. This last item of information makes it possible to anticipate the moment when the source cylinder will have to be replaced, either directly and remotely by the gas supplier or at the request of the user.

Moreover, by virtue of the pressure sensor 8 and the stored data, it is possible to signal the existence of any gas leaks to the user.

Although the invention has been described with reference to specific embodiments, it is not restricted to these but may be subject to modifications and variants which will become apparent to a person skilled in the art within the scope of the claims which follow. In particular, in a more concrete version, the gas source may itself be provided with a label identifying the type of gas that it contains and the base 1 may have a mobile read means identifying the gas source. The low-pressure circuit would not be allowed to open in this case unless the gas type identified on the label of the container properly corresponds to the gas type marked in the label of the source.